

**Municipal League of King County
Ballot Issues Committee**

**City of Seattle Charter Amendment No. 5
Elect City Council Members by District
2003 General Election Ballot Measure**

Summary of Measure

The measure would amend the charter of the City to create nine electoral districts based on population and to require election of City Council members from districts, rather than at-large as has been the case since 1910. Council candidates would have to be U.S. citizens, registered voters in Seattle, and residents of their district for at least 90 days prior to filing their candidacy.

If the measure passes, a Districting Commission would be appointed by January 31, 2004, with two members appointed by the Mayor, two by a two-thirds vote of the City Council, and the fifth by the other four members. The Commission would develop a plan of nine districts having nearly equal populations and boundaries that are contiguous and conforming to traditional and recognized neighborhoods. A proposed plan would be made public by June 1, 2004, public hearings would be held, and following any modifications, the plan would be adopted by a majority of the Commission by August 1, 2004.

The November 2005 City Council election would be held by district. At midnight on December 31, 2005, the terms of all sitting Council members would expire, and on January 1, 2006 the newly-elected members by district would take office. The district boundaries would be adjusted following each decennial census thereafter.

Arguments FOR the Measure

The following arguments were put forth by the proponents of the measure:

- Council members elected by district would bring representative government closer to the people and result in elected officials who are more knowledgeable about local concerns and issues.
- Council members would be more identifiable and accountable to their constituents. People would easily know whom to call if they had a problem.
- Individuals and neighborhoods would have a stronger voice in local government.
- Government spending would be more equitably distributed across neighborhoods throughout the city.
- Elections by district would reduce the influence of downtown business and other special interests.
- Elections by district would reduce the cost of campaigns and the influence of money, and give "shoe leather" candidates more of a chance to be elected.
- Council members elected by district would form a more effective City Council because, representing diverse constituencies and perspectives, members would have to become more fully informed on issues, engage in policy debates and do a better job vetting proposed legislation.

- Citizens are clearly unhappy with the current system; they are cynical about campaign finances and ethical violations; they feel government is unresponsive; and they do not vote or participate actively in the local democratic process.
- Almost all major cities in the U.S. have elections by district and their local governments work well.

Arguments AGAINST the Measure

The following arguments were put forth by the opponents of the measure:

- Election of the City Council by district would result in elected officials focusing on narrower, more parochial issues at the expense of more important citywide or regional issues. Emphasis would shift from broad policy issues—what’s best for Seattle as a whole—to district-oriented concerns.
- Seattle’s at-large electoral system has worked well for nearly one hundred years, keeping corruption in check and fostering broad civic participation. Voters have turned down district elections in 1927, 1975, and 1995.
- If voters are disaffected and elected officials unresponsive, district elections are not the solution to the problem. Cities with district elections have these problems too.
- The at-large Council gives citizens nine representatives to appeal to and whose election they can influence, rather than just one.
- At-large elections provide the largest geographic base from which to select a wide range of candidates, and Seattle has an excellent track record of electing a diverse Council representing many minority groups and all parts of the City.
- Drawing districts is expensive, time-consuming and divisive, and may raise issues of gerrymandering.
- While the cost of campaigns may be somewhat lower per candidate because fewer voters must be reached, total spending per vote may be as high or higher; the average cost per candidate rose in San Francisco after that city moved to district elections.
- Systems with elections by district may develop an entrenched incumbency because communities of similar interests “lock in” on an individual who becomes unbeatable over time.
- The argument that the current system has inequitably directed City spending to downtown at the expense of neighborhoods overlooks the fact that some major facilities need to be centrally located and would not be welcomed in neighborhoods.

Recommendation and Rationale

Municipal League recommends voters **oppose** the charter amendment to elect the Seattle City Council by district. We feel strongly that while there are problems with accountability and responsiveness with the current City Council, these are not problems that district elections would solve. On the contrary, the League believes that greater governance problems might be introduced, such as fragmentation, parochialism, neighborhoods pitted against each other for resources, inability to site unpopular facilities, and solidified incumbency. The League does not believe that elections by district would address the costs of campaigns or the influence of moneyed special interests. Accountability might actually be less as elected officials would take

responsibility only for their own districts and not for solving urgent citywide problems. We were not persuaded that elections by district would increase diversity, improve policymaking or do a better job of allocating resources.

Having recommended a NO on the charter amendment, the League still wants to send the message that City governance does need improvement. Real problems exist, including failures of oversight, time-wasting emphasis on trivial issues, citizen frustration with unresponsive officials, and other similar concerns. Municipal League would like to join with other civic groups to examine the causes of these problems and to propose possible solutions.